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ABSTRACT

Intensive observation of the helping interactions of 40 children in the third through fifth grades of five Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area schools was conducted for the purpose of assessing the impact of familiarity on the success of children's help-seeking from peers. The amount of visual regard that children received from peers was also assessed. Three types of students were selected for participation: 15 students from resource rooms, 15 students mainstreamed from self-contained classrooms, and 10 students who spent all of their instructional time in the mainstream. Students from resource rooms differed from those from self-contained classrooms in the extent to which they were exposed to regular students in instructional settings. Findings suggested that the relative lack of help-seeking success experienced by the self-contained classroom students was due to a tendency on the part of those students to make fewer requests than their classmates, and to have even fewer of their requests accepted by other students in the mainstream classroom. The familiarity of students from self-contained classrooms and resource rooms to their classmates covaried positively with others' acceptance of their help-seeking requests. Students in the regular classroom directed more of their visual regard to students from resource rooms than to students from self-contained classrooms. The more visual regard children received from classmates, the more likely they were to have their helping requests accepted. (Author/RH)

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The Effects of Familiarity on the Success of Children's Help-Seeking

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Running Head: Help-Seeker Familiarity

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Abstract

The present study assessed the impact of familiarity on the success of children's help-seeking from peers. The helping interactions of forty children at the third through fifth grades were observed naturalistically during their classroom activities. The amount of visual regard that children received from peers was included as a sociometric measure. Labeled students from self-contained classrooms, segregated to the greatest extent, had the least success of any group in their help-seeking. Labeled students from resource rooms, mainstreamed for most classes, were more similar to nonlabeled students in the pattern of their help-seeking. Both groups of labeled children, but especially the self-contained classroom students, received less visual regard from nonlabeled students. The more familiar labeled students were to their classmates, the more accepted they were and the more likely they were to have their help-seeking requests accepted.

Research on children's social relationships with peers has heightened our awareness of the diverse functions of peer relations in their lives (Hartup, 1983; Mueller & Cooper, 1986). Peers set norms for behavior and teach children social, motor, and cognitive skills. Thus, peers are important resources for the development of children's academic and social competence. It is of interest therefore to identify and describe factors associated with individual differences in children's access to the peer group.

Undoubtedly there are many factors beyond children's control (e.g., handicaps, physical attributes) that influence their potential for achieving successful peer relations (Hartup, 1983). There are, however, many types of peer contact such as negotiating, bargaining, and participating in collaborative and didactic exchanges that require considerable learning and practice (Mueller & Cooper, 1986). Seeking help from peers requires skill in engaging in these types of contact (Nelson-Le Gall, 1981; 1985). Although several studies have documented the help-seeking behaviors of children within the classroom peer group (e.g., Nelson-Le Gall & DeCooke, 1987; Nelson-Le Gall & Glor-Scheib, 1985) and the relationship of these behaviors to peer acceptance (e.g., Nelson-Le Gall & Glor-Scheib, 1986), the importance of previous experience with peers as a prerequisite for success in help-seeking is seldom stressed.

Brody, Graziano, and Musser (1983) found that elementary school children respond differentially to familiar versus nonfamiliar younger peers during cooperative tasks. When older children were given additional contact with younger peers with whom they were previously unacquainted, their subsequent performance on the cooperative task indicated more equalitarian interactions and group performance improved significantly. Brody et al. (1983) suggest that repeated exposure to younger peers may help break down stereotyped expectancies about the problem-solving capabilities of younger children.

Studies of preschool and elementary school children suggest that familiarity with peer norms

about appropriate help-seeking strategies and behaviors is important for social acceptance (e.g., Ladd & Oden, 1979; Moore & Updegraff, 1964). For example, Moore and Updegraff (1964) suggest that appropriate help-seeking directed towards peers, rather than teachers, may facilitate a child's social acceptance. Also, researchers have found that children well liked by their peers possessed greater shared knowledge regarding situationally appropriate helping behaviors (Ladd & Oden, 1979). Although adults may try to inculcate this knowledge, shared experience with peers is probably a more powerful means of acquiring and fine-tuning the rules of its application.

The mainstream classroom provides a natural laboratory for studying the effects of familiarity on the quality of peer relations in middle childhood. In regular classrooms all children potentially have equal opportunities to be exposed to the classroom peer group and its activities. Mainstream classrooms, however, have special education students who regularly spend time away from their classmates and thus have less opportunity to observe and interact with other students in the class. Although mainstreamed special education children are deemed competent to function adequately in the regular classroom environment by teachers, they may at first be perceived as academically incompetent by regular students. Repeated exposure to and positive interactions with labeled peers may lead nonlabeled students to revise their expectations upward, eventually resulting in more equalitarian interaction in classroom problem-solving as well as social situations. Indeed, because labeled children are present in regular classrooms in relatively small numbers, it is important that they experience positive interactions with their nonlabeled classmates. The purpose of the present study was, therefore, to examine the influence of familiarity on the effectiveness of children's help-seeking and on their social status in mainstream classrooms.

In order to assess the effects of differing amounts of familiarity, children mainstreamed from special education classrooms operating under two different models were included in the present study: resource rooms and self-contained classrooms. These two types of models differ in the

degree to which labeled students are exposed to regular students in instructional settings. Labeled students from resource rooms are in mainstream classes for most classes and only leave for special instruction a few periods a week. Labeled students from self-contained classrooms spend most of their instruction time in segregated classrooms and are only in the mainstream for selected academic courses.

It was expected that children mainstreamed from self-contained classrooms, being less familiar to their nonlabeled classmates, would have low rates of help-seeking. Furthermore, these students were expected to experience low rates of success when seeking help from peers. Students from self-contained classrooms were also expected to have lowered social acceptance in the mainstream classroom as indicated by an observational measure, described below, the amount of visual regard received from classmates. In contrast, resource room students, by virtue of being more familiar to their mainstream classmates, were expected to appear more similar to their nonlabeled peers, i.e., they would evidence similar rates of help-seeking and experience greater success in their help-seeking endeavors than students from self-contained classrooms. Resource room students were also expected to receive more visual regard from students in the mainstream classroom than would their self-contained counterparts.

Methods

Subjects

Elementary schools in the public school systems of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area with relatively large programs for mainstreaming special education students, e.g., placement of several students in classrooms at each grade level, were contacted to participate in the research. Of eight elementary schools approached, five schools were able to accommodate our observation schedule and agreed to participate. Forty third- through fifth-grade children from classrooms with labeled students mainstreamed for academic courses were selected for intensive observation.[1] Parental permission was obtained for all participating children. All children were from predominantly lower-middle class families.

The subjects comprised three distinct types of students. Fifteen subjects were labeled students from resource rooms. Another 15 subjects were labeled students mainstreamed from self-contained classrooms. Information concerning the history of the extent of mainstreaming each labeled student had experienced was not available. Ten nonlabeled students who spent all of their instruction time in the mainstream, chosen randomly from classrooms in which labeled students were placed, provided baseline frequencies for coded behavior.

Measures

Help-Seeking Success. Whenever a focal child approached a peer to elicit aid, information, or materials relating to an academic task, the behavior was identified as a help-seeking bid. The response to the request - accept, deny, ignore - was noted as the variable of interest. The definitions of the three response outcome codes are summarized in the Observational Checklist, shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Visual Regard. The decision was made to use an observational measure of peer acceptance, as opposed to a more intrusive paper and pencil sociometric measure where children are asked to make overt positive and negative peer choices. Since labeled children are likely to be perceived as different, it is likely that this 'differentness' would be made more salient by obtaining sociometric nominations and ratings. Therefore, visual attention directed towards children by their peers was the sociometric indicator employed in this observational study (see Table 1). The distribution of visual attention among members of a peer group has been found to strongly correlate (r=.79) with social status, measured by picture paired-comparison sociometric techniques (Vaughn & Waters, 1980; 1981). In addition, by taking the observational measure of peer status contemporaneously with the observations of peer interactional behaviors, the problem of changes in peer group structures are minimized as compared to when paper and pencil measures are given before or after the observation of behavioral interactions among members of the group.

Procedure

Four female observers collected 100 minutes of data on each focal child using a combined focal child/event sampling procedure. Data were collected in 10 minute segments spread over several class periods. All helping interactions involving the focal child were recorded. Visual regard was observed concurrently with observations of help-seeking, but was recorded independently of such requests and social interactions, e.g., when a focal child requested help from a peer, this was recorded only as a specific response outcome and not as a response outcome and visual regard from a targeted helper.

All observations occurred during regularly scheduled academic instructional periods. Class periods included instruction as well as any monitored or free work periods. Although classroom structure varied, all classroom structures provided opportunity for some amount of student-student interaction. Observers were positioned in each classroom to allow them to view the focal child's behavior and to hear any verbalizations. Observers did not intervene in any of the child's activities or respond to any bids for help. Coder reliability (measured by the number of agreements/number of agreements + number of disagreements) was maintained within a range of 87% to 100% (see Table 1).

Results

We observed 244 separate incidents of help-seeking initiated by focal children. The children receiving special education instruction in resource rooms initiated over half of these (54.9%). Non-labeled children initiated a fourth (25.4%) of the observed incidents and children mainstreamed from self-contained special education classrooms initiated the remainder (19.7%).

The proportion of requests accepted, requests denied, and requests ignored were calculated for each subject. Proportions were used because the number of help-seeking bids coded varied by subject. The distribution of proportions for help-seeking, however, showed a slight degree of negative skewness indicating that children had proportionately more of their requests accepted

than denied or ignored. These proportions were stabilized using an arcsin transformation (Winer, 1971). All analyses were carried out on the transformed data. However, the overall proportion of requests accepted for each mainstreaming category (requests accepted/total number of requests), based on the untransformed data, will be reported to describe the overall degree of success each focal group had in seeking help.

Math and reading achievement scores[2] indicated that resource room students (mean=4.54) were achieving at approximately the same level as the nonlabeled students in the sample (mean=5.56). The mean math and reading stanines of the self-contained classroom students (mean=3.33), however, were lower than those of the resource room students and the nonlabeled students. Achievement was, therefore, used as a covariate in the analyses.

The Effect of Familiarity on Help-Seeking Success

A series of One-Way Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVAs) were performed to examine the effects of the type of current exposure to the mainstream (self-contained classroom, resource room, and regular classroom) on the outcomes of children's requests. Achievement, used as the covariate in these analyses, was found to be nonsignificant (all $\underline{F}$s<1). Separate analyses for each possible request outcome (accept, deny, ignore) were considered more appropriate because these categories were devised to be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. In addition, $\underline{t}$-tests were performed on the mean differences corresponding to the major questions of interest.

In order to assess for differences in the frequency of help-seeking that varied by type of mainstream exposure, the frequency of help-seeking was summed across the three request outcome classifications. $\underline{T}$-tests indicated that students from self-contained classrooms made significantly fewer requests ($\underline{m}$=49.46) than did the students from resource rooms ($\underline{m}$=75.44) or the nonlabeled students ($\underline{m}$=65.46), $\underline{p}$s$<.01$. The resource room students and the nonlabeled students did not differ significantly in the total frequency of requests for help, $\underline{p}<.10$.

The proportion of requests made that were accepted varied with mainstreaming category: self-contained classroom students, $\underline{X}$=0.55; resource room students, $\underline{X}$=0.89; nonlabeled students, $\underline{X}$=0.77. The main effect for the type of mainstreaming in the Accept analysis was significant, $\underline{F}(2,33)=4.43$, $\underline{p}<.02$ (see Table 2 for a presentation of the mean frequencies of all request outcomes). $\underline{T}$-tests indicated that the self-contained classroom students, those spending the least amount of time in the mainstream, had fewer of their requests accepted as compared to the nonlabeled students and the resource room students ($\underline{p}$s$<.01$). The means did not differ significantly for the latter two groups. As can be seen from Table 2, children from self-contained classrooms were more likely than children in the other two groups to experience noncompliance from mainstream classmates with respect to their help-seeking requests. Differences in the Deny and the Ignore analyses, however, fell short of statistical significance. This suggests that the relative lack of help-seeking success experienced by the self-contained classroom students is due to a tendency for these students to make fewer requests than classmates, and to have even fewer of these requests accepted by other students in the mainstream classroom.

Insert Table 2 About Here

In the second analysis, a Familiarity Score, reflecting the proportion of instruction time spent in the mainstream classroom (number of instruction periods currently spent in the mainstream/total number of instruction periods per week), was calculated for each labeled child. Nonlabeled children were excluded from this analysis because they spend all of their instruction time in the mainstream. On the average, children mainstreamed from self-contained classrooms spent 23% (range=8%-75%) of their instruction time in regular classrooms, while resource room students spent 82% (range=75%-90%) of their instruction time in the mainstream. This familiarity score was correlated with the proportion of help-seeking requests that each child had accepted (requests accepted/total number of requests). It was expected that as the degree of mainstreaming

increased, so would a child's help-seeking success. This hypothesis was supported, $r(28)=0.45$, $p<0.01$. The more familiar labeled children were to their classmates, the more likely they were to have their help-seeking requests accepted.

The Effect of Familiarity on Visual Regard

Because labeled students are a minority in mainstream classrooms, it is important that they are accepted into the social structure of the majority, i.e., accorded favorable standing in the peer group of nonlabeled children. The ANCOVA indicated that there were significant differences in the amounts of visual regard (see Table 3) directed at different groups of focal children by their nonlabeled peers beyond that accounted for by achievement, $F(2,33)=4.97$, $p<.02$. A t-test was performed to assess the relationship of familiarity to the amount of visual regard labeled children received from their nonlabeled peers. Nonlabeled children directed more of their visual regard to labeled students from resource rooms than to labeled students from self-contained classrooms, $p<.05$.

The results reported above indicate that there were mean differences at the group level in the extent to which mainstreaming influenced the direction of children's visual regard. Therefore, the second test performed was a correlational analysis to test for linearity in this relationship. In the present sample, the proportion of time spent in the mainstream was related to the amount of visual regard that focal children received from nonlabeled classmates after partialing out achievement, $r(35)=.36$, $p<.05$.

The Relationship Between Visual Regard and Help-seeking

Visual attention from classmates, as a measure of social status, may reflect the ability of children to influence their peers. Children's success in eliciting help from peers in response to help-seeking requests may be seen as a behavioral measure of this influence. Therefore, it would be expected that the amount of visual regard that focal children receive from peers would correlate with the proportion of help-seeking requests focal children have accepted by peers.

Again, a significant partial correlation was obtained, $r(35)=0.35$, $p<0.05$. The more visual regard children received from classmates, the more likely they were to have their helping requests accepted.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that familiarity influences children's help-seeking and social status in mainstream classrooms. As expected, success in help-seeking varied with familiarity. Although all children in the current sample sought help most often from nonlabeled classmates (89% of all requests were directed to nonlabeled children), students in our sample from self-contained classrooms were not as successful in their help-seeking endeavors as their mainstream classmates. Because students from self-contained classrooms were the least familiar to the peer group, they might still be perceived as 'different,' or possibly as less competent in their mainstream subjects. The regular students in the class may be less willing to engage in help exchanges with less familiar peers because they consider the likelihood of profiting from help given by such peers to be significantly less. By virtue of spending the majority of their instruction time in the mainstream, resource room students may be perceived by regular classmates as generally as competent as themselves. Furthermore, self-contained classroom children may perceive mainstream classmates who receive special education in resource rooms as more competent than themselves. Children may be more willing to give help to resource room students when it is requested because they expect the resource room student may be able to reciprocate (cf., DePaulo & Fisher, 1980; Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971). The data from the present study do not allow us to determine whether children do indeed attribute differential levels of competence to familiar versus nonfamiliar mainstreamed labeled students. It will be important to determine in future research the perceptions held by both nonlabeled and labeled students of their own and their mainstream classmates' scholastic competence. In addition, the nature of the academic tasks with which help is being requested should be considered in future studies. Special education students differ amongst themselves in cognitive and social competencies. With

increased exposure to these peers, nonlabeled children may come to have greater knowledge of their labeled peers' intellectual and social characteristics and develop more differentiated impressions of their task-relevant competencies and limitations.

A corollary goal of the present study was to assess the overall social status of special education children in the mainstream classroom. Students from self-contained classrooms received the least visual regard from nonlabeled students, suggesting that these special education students are indeed lower in social status. In contrast, the resource room students received somewhat more visual regard from nonlabeled classmates indicating a higher level of status with these peers.

Although the measure used, visual regard, yielded findings that are in line with those reported in previous investigations of sociometric status in special populations (cf. Bryan, 1976; Kauffman & Kneedler, 1981), there were difficulties encountered using this measure in elementary school classrooms that may not have arisen with its use in preschool groups. In general, the amount of visual attention directed towards other children was low. There are more forces operating in elementary school classrooms that might control the direction of children's visual attention. For example, because there is increasingly more formal instruction, children may be relatively more concerned with the teacher's location and activities than with those of their peers. Older children may have less freedom to move and look around the room which automatically limits the selection of peers to whom one could direct visual regard. The use of visual regard as a sociometric was a drawback in our study with respect to establishing sociometric baselines for the classroom groups as a whole. A different measure of the social network of the classroom peer group would have better served the need to control for variability in frequencies of affiliative interactions when interpreting differences in visual regard. Nevertheless, the evidence obtained in the present study for differing amounts of visual regard provides some validation of this measure as an indicator of social status for older children.

In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that the more time children spend in the mainstream, the more accepted they are in to the peer structure of the classroom. Because peer acceptance is related to competence in peer relations, as was the case for successful help-seeking, having adequate opportunity to become familiar with the peer norms for situationally appropriate behavior is important. Although it was not possible in this study to collect information on each labeled child's past history of mainstreaming, additional studies should be conducted to collect sociometric information and to interview nonlabeled and labeled children concerning their knowledge of help-seeking strategies at different points in the mainstreaming process. This would enable us to document changes in sociometric status and to chart the development of knowledge of help-seeking strategies as mainstreaming increases. In addition, because it is possible that success in seeking help is influenced by the social status and skills of the nonlabeled peers who are targeted as helpers, it would be of value to collect similar information on nonlabeled children differing in degree of familiarity. Children who transfer to new schools, who miss long periods of school due to illness, and those who are truant, may also lack the experience with peers and peer group norms needed to become integrated into the social structure of the classroom, as well as to successfully master appropriate help-seeking strategies and fine-tune the rules of their application.

The social structure of the activities in mainstream classrooms may also influence children's opportunities to become familiar with peer norms for help-seeking. Environments that legitimize peer contact through the use of cooperative and collaborative learning activities should increase the exposure of nonlabeled children to their labeled classmates. Although the mainstream classrooms in which we observed our sample did not actively restrict peer interactions, they were not environments that actively promoted such contact. (For a more detailed discussion see Minuchin & Shapiro, 1983). It is possible that when nonlabeled students do not have the opportunity to become accustomed to the presence and capabilities of special education students as individuals, they will hold stereotyped expectancies about their behavior and skills. In

addition, the role of teacher behavior in peer relations in mainstream classrooms should be investigated in future research. If classroom activities are structured to restrict direct contact between labeled and nonlabeled children, or if teachers interact differently with these two types of students in mainstream classrooms, then such stereotyped expectancies may be maintained (Kornblau & Keogh, 1980). Insofar as the effectiveness of mainstreaming is dependent upon integration into the peer structure of the classroom, more systematic attention to factors within regular classrooms that affect peer acceptance of labeled children in the mainstream is warranted.

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Footnotes

[1]In the population of special education students, Learning Disabled (LD) and Socially-and-Emotionally Disturbed (SED) children are most often mainstreamed for academic subjects in the intermediate elementary school years. Children who are labeled LD are perceived to have a learning handicap as the primary basis for their difficulties, while children labeled SED typically come to the attention of special educators primarily because of their disturbed classroom behaviors and their social interactional difficulties. Examination of the distributions of variables of interest indicated no differences between the LD and SED students in our sample.

[2]Achievement stanines were not available for two resource room students and one nonlabeled student. Data from these three subjects were excluded from further analyses, leaving 15 students from self-contained classrooms, 13 resource room students, and nine nonlabeled students to serve as subjects.

Table 1

The Observational Checklist and Observer Agreement

Category	Definition of Coding Variable	Observer Agreement (%)
Requests Accepted	The focal child requests help of another child and the chosen helper responds positively to the request for help.	90.0
Requests Denied	The focal child requests help of another child and the chosen helper actively refuses to give the desired help, i.e., "I won't help you with your math."	100.0
Requests Ignored	The focal child requests help of another child and the chosen helper does not acknowledge the request for help, i.e., just stares at the helpee and then turns away (this category does not include instances where the request for help was not heard).	100.0
Visual Regard	The frequency of glances and looks directed at the focal child by another child in the classroom.	87.0

Table 2

Mean Request Outcome as a Function of Extent of Mainstreaming Controlling for Achievement

		Request Outcome					
		Unadjusted Means			Adjusted Means		
Focal Children	Achievement Stanine	Accept	Deny	Ignore	Accept	Deny	Ignore
Self-Contained Classroom Students (n=15)	3.33 (1.23)	27.43 (28.98)	10.46 (16.77)	11.57 (18.55)	28.47	10.58	10.06
Resource Room Students (n=13)	4.54 (1.13)	67.63 (24.01)	1.50 (5.40)	6.31 (10.38)	67.37	1.47	6.69
Regular Classroom Students (n=9)	5.56 (1.59)	51.49 (43.48)	11.67 (29.79)	2.30 (6.90)	50.14	11.50	4.27

Note: Standard Deviations are in parentheses.

Table 3

Targets of Nonlabeled Children's Visual Regard Controlling for Achievement

Focal Children	Achievement Stanine	Frequency of Visual Regard: Unadjusted Mean	Frequency of Visual Regard: Adjusted Mean
Self-Contained Classroom Students (n=15)	3.33 (1.23)	13.00 (14.46)	9.59
Resource Room Students (n=13)	4.54 (1.13)	15.77 (6.92)	16.62
Regular Classroom Students (n=9)	5.56 (1.59)	25.44 (17.53)	29.89

Note: Standard Deviations are in parentheses.